

I Believe in Love

by eirenical

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Summary: Claude and Berger are finally settled into their life together and enjoying every moment of it after all that time spent apart... but nothing can ever be quite that easy, especially with Sheila back in the mix. Sequel to 'Where Do I Go'. Claude/Berger AU.

## 1. Chapter 1

**February 11, 2010:** I don't know what it is about this musical that inspires me so damned much, but whatever it is... I'm loving it! ^\_^ This is a direct sequel to my first Hair fanfic, "Where Do I Go?". This one takes place a little less than a year after that one ended. This time from Berger's POV. Our boys are finally settled into their life together and enjoying their time as "newlyweds"... but nothing can ever be quite that easy. Part 1 of 3.

**Warnings:** Still slash. ^\_^ Strong PG-13, dipping its toes into 'R' territory here and there. Enjoy?

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><p><em><strong>I Believe in Love<br>**\_**by Renee-chan

If he'd known what the weekend would bring, Berger wouldn't have allowed Claude out of bed that morning. He'd have tied him to the bedpost, locked the door to their apartment and not let him out again until the next month. Unfortunately, he didn't know... and Claude would not have been happy with that. In that respect, he hadn't changed much since they'd been young... over a decade ago. He still found it hard to grasp sometimes, this idea that he'd lost almost 13 years of his life. It was such a monumentally large amount of time, it made him shudder to think about it. But anytime that he would start to get overwhelmed, start to slide under the waves of his ever-ready drug flashbacks, there would be Claude -- real and warm and whole and there -- to bring him back to reality.

He couldn't even begin to count the ways in which he was lucky to have the other man back in his life, but for this one he was more grateful than most: Claude was his anchor to the present, the bedrock that kept the ground stable beneath his feet... the safe haven where he could rest when life got too hard to handle. It had been a bit shocking to discover, however, that for all that... Claude wasn't entirely stable himself.

Berger lazily rolled over to face the other side of the bed where the man he loved was peacefully sleeping... or not, as the case might be. A frown crossed his features. He hadn't even felt Claude get out of bed. That meant he'd done it far too early. With an irritated sigh, Berger got out of bed and grabbed for his robe. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes with one hand and pulling the robe on with the other, he made his way out into the living room. He wasn't too surprised with what he found when he got there.

Claude was sitting at the kitchen table, staring out the window and cradling a cup of coffee in his hands. Based on the mild shake he could see in the other man's hands, he had to conclude that that cup of coffee had not been his first. Moving slowly so as not to startle his lover, Berger joined him in the kitchen. When he got there, he gently pulled the coffee cup out of Claude's hands. He took a small sip and had just enough time to put the mug down on the counter before Claude realized that it was missing and that he was no longer alone... and jerked around to stare wild-eyed at him.

The first time this had happened, Berger hadn't expected it and it had nearly scared him back into a schizophrenic break. That had been months ago. It was a sad state of affairs that it had happened so often since that he now not only wasn't startled by it, but he had a system to deal with it. At his lover's frantic look, Berger just calmly raised an eyebrow. Given a few moments to work through what had happened, Claude would usually come back to himself. If he didn't... well, it hadn't happened often and the few times it had -- those had been bad days. As bad as Berger's bad days. To himself, he snorted, What a pair we make...

Sure enough, after a moment or two of staring, Claude's eyes unglazed and he seemed to recollect where he was. He slumped at the table, head dropping onto his arms as he let out a breath and some of the tension along with it. That was Berger's cue. Stepping forward, he placed strong hands on his lover's neck and started gently massaging muscles that were still far too tight. Eventually, Claude let out a small moan and the rest of the tension left his shoulders. Berger turned the massage into a caress, letting his hands slide around the other man to pull him back against his chest. Claude rolled his eyes up to look at him, a weary yet grateful look on his face as he whispered out, "Thanks."

Berger planted a gentle kiss on those upturned lips, then released him to sit down on the chair caddy-corner to him. Taking one of Claude's clenched hands in his, he started gently working the tension out of it, too. He sighed, "That's the second time this week, Claudio. How long have you been up?"

Claude took his free hand and rubbed at his eyes before turning to look at the clock. He groaned when he saw that the time read 6 AM, "Almost four hours."

Berger clucked his tongue at him as he traded hands so he could work on the other one. Quietly he asked, "You wanna tell me about it?" It was a loaded question. Sometimes, Claude did want to talk about whatever nightmare had driven him out of the warmth of their bed -- sometimes he didn't. And when he didn't, he was... touchy about it. Berger would have liked to say that he hadn't been like that before, but the reality was... he had been. He'd always been far more likely to run away and hide from his problems than to try to confront them and he was far too prone to making important, life-altering decisions when he was overwrought. It was just one of those odd personality quirks that made him who he was. And Berger had found that he'd grown to love him for it, even if it occasionally made things far more difficult than they had to be.

This time, Claude paled at the question and swallowed hard. Before he could open his mouth to make up some kind of excuse, Berger held up a finger to hold the other man's lips shut, then shook his head, "Don't. If it was that bad... I don't want to make you relive it again."

A shudder was Claude's only answer. Berger placed his hands on either side of Claude's face and pulled him in for a tender kiss. It was almost odd how the tables turned so often between them, changing their roles back and forth from comforter to comforted with almost no warning. It had started about three months after they'd moved out of Jeanie's apartment and into their own. They'd had a lot of fun in those months, rediscovering all the things they'd loved about each other and for once fully able to focus on one another now that Sheila wasn't between them. Every day was a discovery -- doubly so with Claude regaining more and more of his memory all the time. It was a gift as it gave them plenty to talk about without having to touch the 13 years that Claude had been held captive by his life in Kansas and Berger had been prisoner to his madness.

It wasn't until those three months had passed that they'd discovered that Claude's returning memory could be a curse, as well. It had never really occurred to them that when Claude had said he was missing most of his life before 1970... that included his time in Viet Nam. Oh, he'd had nightmares about it before, sure -- Berger slept with him, he couldn't help but know that -- but Claude had never seemed to carry the memory of those nightmares into the waking light of day. Not so anymore. Not since that night...

They'd been meeting Jeanie, Cloud, Crissy and the man she was dating for dinner. They usually tried to do that once every 1-2 weeks. If they didn't, Jeanie or Crissy would show up on their doorstep and try to pound down the door. It was probably leftover fear from all those years they'd had to track him down on the street, and really it was cute in a way... it was just that they had such awful timing. It made Berger realize that there was, in fact, something worse than no sex at all -- and that was interrupted sex. Having just as much of an issue with Jeanie and Crissy's bad timing as he did, Claude made meticulously sure that they met the girls for dinner at least twice a month to reassure them that they were still alive and sane.

That night, Jeanie had been more excited than usual to see them. She had some sort of project that she was working on and wanted to talk to them. Once dinner was over and Cloud had gone to bed, they'd shared bottle after bottle of wine and stories of their past bounced between them in a never-ending round robin as the alcohol flowed.

Crissy's poor beau hadn't been part of the hippie culture and seemed to get more and more shocked with every story and every indiscretion they shared. Thank goodness for the alcohol blurring the edges for him or Crissy might have had to find a new boyfriend come morning.

Finally running out of things to share, Berger and Claude had stumbled home, more drunk than either had been in a long time and more drunk than either cared to admit. They'd crawled into bed, barely coherent enough to get out of their clothes, much less do anything else. So, it was with great dismay that Berger had been awoken out of his drunken stupor not two hours later by Claude's arm flung across his face. He'd sat up, rubbing his nose and ready to scold his lover, when he'd realized that Claude was not exactly awake... but he was clearly distressed. Realizing that Claude was dreaming about his time in Viet Nam, Berger had tried to soothe him out of it, as had always worked before. Not this time. This time, Claude grew increasingly disturbed, no matter what he did. Finally, he'd awoken himself with a strangled cry, sitting bolt upright in their bed, that frantic, not-quite-sane look in his eyes. He'd turned those haunted eyes to the other side of the bed and when he spotted Berger, he'd collapsed into his arms, letting loose a torrent of soul-sick weeping.

By morning, Claude was almost back to normal. Berger tried to get him to talk about it, but all that Claude would say was that he'd remembered something about his time in Viet Nam, something bad. Berger had been too scared of making things worse to ask him to elaborate and he hadn't seemed willing, anyway. These days, Claude's nightmares had gotten quieter, though no less traumatizing for that. The only advantage to Claude was that he could slip out of bed to run those agonizing memories over and over in his head without Berger waking up and trying to lance the festering wound. Needless to say, Berger didn't consider that much of an advantage. And on those rare bad days, Berger was almost willing to trade in his own sanity if it would take those memories back away from his Claude.

Releasing his lover, Berger got up from the table and went to go wash out the coffee pot so he could make some fresh coffee. When Claude made an interested noise and stood up to follow him away from the table, Berger wrinkled his nose at him, "Who said you get any? I think you've had enough."

Claude grumbled, "At this point, I'd inject the stuff IV if I thought it would help me wake up."

Berger snorted in response to that, "Your own damned fault for picking a job that you have to be at by 7:30 in the morning and then not having the sense to come back to bed when you wake up in the middle of the night."

Claude's face shuttered and he looked away, "You know why I didn't come back."

Feeling unusually belligerent this morning, Berger turned around to face him, arms braced on the counter behind him, "Yeah. 'Cuz you'd rather mope around in the kitchen drowning your sorrows in brandy-laced coffee than come back to me and let me help." At the other man's shocked look, Berger sneered, "I know you pretty well, Claudio, and I'm no idiot. I know the taste of alcohol when it hits

my tongue."

Claude's eyes landed on the coffee cup that Berger had pulled out of his hands, then he slumped, "I didn't want... You need your rest, Berger."

And there was the crux of the problem. Walking across the kitchen, Berger pressed Claude back against the counter and wrapped his arms around him, "I haven't been that fragile in months, Claude. I'm not going to break and you don't need to handle me with kid gloves." Planting a chaste kiss on his lover's forehead, Berger offered him a teasing smile, "In fact, you did such a good job helping me put myself back together... I'd like a chance to do the same for you."

Claude was trembling in his arms, like he'd like to run from this as he did everything else. Berger wasn't letting him go this time. This time, he'd get the answer he wanted if it killed them both. Claude had had a thirteen year grace period on not dealing with these memories and that had been a blessing, really it had. If Claude had had to deal with them without having anyone around who could help, he'd probably have ended up like so many of those other Viet Nam vets that Berger had known while living on the streets of New York -- trapped in the horror of memory with drugs their only escape. For that reason, alone, Berger had to be grateful for the amnesia that had taken Claude away from him, because it bought him time until Berger was ready to help. But he couldn't do it if Claude wouldn't let him!

Finally the tremors eased and Claude let his head fall to rest on Berger's shoulder, face pressed into his neck. If Berger hadn't been listening for them so closely, he'd have missed the words that Claude spoke into his skin, "I can't promise you anything... but I'll try. OK?"

Rubbing gentle circles around his lover's back, Berger felt like he'd won a major victory, "OK, Claudio. Not the best answer, but I'll take it." Pressing a kiss into the exposed crook of Claude's neck, Berger reluctantly let go, "Why don't you go take a shower while I finish with the coffee and make breakfast?"

Claude frowned, probably remembering one of the many times Berger had set off the smoke detector in their apartment, "Since when can you cook?"

Berger just gave him a bright smile, "I can't." Holding up a finger to forestall any protests, Berger finished with a flourish, "But I pour a mean bowl of cereal and milk!"

That last finally did what Berger had hoped it would do -- it put a smile on Claude's face. Seeing the smile chase the last of the tension from his lover's eyes, Berger shooed him out of the kitchen and turned back to the coffee pot. Just like they had all the others, Berger was certain that somehow they'd weather this storm, too.

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><p>A shower, three cups of coffee and a bowl of cereal later, Claude looked a little more alert. He'd have a rough day of it today, but at least Berger was no longer afraid he'd get run down in the street by

a bus for lack of attention to his surroundings. It was unfair to send Claude to work when he was so clearly exhausted, but they didn't have much choice. It was times like this that he worried most about the fact that only one of them had a stable job. The last thing he wanted to be was a burden, but having been expelled from high school and never having gone back, there weren't many jobs he was qualified to do that didn't involve menial labor. And trying to hold down a job that he didn't have the heart for had made it harder for him to hold himself together. It wasn't that he was too stupid to do the work... He just hadn't been able to bring himself to care enough to try to do a decent job at whatever he'd tried. Then he'd get reprimanded and given warnings and hemmed in by all those added rules and restrictions he'd start to fragment again. Claude had understood and finally begged him to stop trying. He'd said that he had faith that when the time was right, Berger would find what he was meant to do and when Claude said it, he believed. And until that happened, at least Claude made enough money to provide for them both.<p>

Berger gave a quiet laugh as he cleaned up the dishes from breakfast. That had been a bit of a surprise, actually. He'd known that Claude had lived a whole other life in those 13 years in Kansas, but they'd never really discussed it. Then sometime in July, a few months after they'd moved, Claude had quietly told him that he'd made some inquiries and sent out a few resumes and had gotten a job at one of the nearby high schools.

He'd been stunned by that revelation. They'd both been so anti-school when they were younger -- hell, Claude had been a drop-out and he'd been expelled for never showing up! -- that Berger couldn't imagine why he'd want to get a job in one and couldn't figure out what kind of job he could even be qualified for, if he did. It was with the red heat of embarrassment suffusing his face that Claude had admitted that his parents had forced him to get his GED when they'd first arrived in Kansas, then had talked him into using the GI bill to go to college. And what had he become? A teacher. He'd spent eight years in Kansas as a history teacher. Berger hadn't quite known how to respond to that. Claude as a history teacher didn't jive with his memory of him or with the new picture he was slowly painting of the person he was now. History teachers wore tweed jackets, suspenders and reading glasses and had a constantly pinched, narrow-eyed look to their features from all the small print they read. That wasn't Claude. It didn't fit... except that obviously some part of it had to or he wouldn't be doing it. And it was the first time they'd ran aground of any issue that indicated how much they'd changed over the last decade and a half, even though in so many ways, they hadn't changed at all.

The good news, though, was that teachers were in demand, especially in the city, and Claude had easily found a job. And with his eight years of experience, his salary was more than enough to cover living expenses for two. That gave Berger time to figure out what he was going to do. And Claude, his sweet Claude... he had indicated more than once that he was willing to support them both forever if that was what it took to make him feel happy and safe. That didn't mean that Berger was thrilled about it, though. He'd had no problem with the idea of living off the generosity of others when he'd been a teenager, but the thought of taking advantage of Claude that same way made him feel a little ill.

Shaking off the memories, Berger decided that sitting around the

kitchen in his robe certainly wasn't getting him any closer to a solution. He got himself showered and dressed, then eyed the clock. It was barely past 8 AM. Damn these early hours. It might be true that the city never slept... but since it never slept, it generally didn't like to rise all that early either. It was far too early to drop in on Jeanie -- and she'd been awfully preoccupied lately, anyway -- Crissy would be on her way to work at the hospital if she wasn't there already, and Berger didn't really know anyone else. They hadn't contacted any of their old friends other than Jeanie and Crissy. It was as though they were too afraid to shatter this oasis of calm that had settled around them. Also... they all knew that once they started contacting the rest of the former Tribe, it would only be a matter of time before they would have to include Sheila in that list... and both Berger and Claude were terrified of adding her back into a mix that was working so well without her. It was selfish and more than a little unfair, but after what they'd both been through, they not-so-secretly thought they deserved to be a little selfish.

Unfortunately, that postponement of contact and his lack of a job left Berger with a little too much idle time on his hands and very little to do with it. And he was worried sick about what he might end up doing with all that empty time. The temptation of turning back to drugs just to make the time pass easier was a strong one, but he knew with sick certainty that once he started with that again, even if it was only one joint, he'd fall right back down that hole he'd been in when Claude had first found him. Hell, he was so afraid of that possibility that he even avoided alcohol whenever he could get away with it.

Drumming his fingers on the table, Berger blew his hair up out of his face. What to do, what to do? Finally unable to take it anymore, Berger grabbed his keys and his jacket and left the apartment to take a walk. Maybe a little fresh air would give him some kind of inspiration for what direction in which he should take his life... and if not, at least it would help pass the time.

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><p>Two hours later found him sitting in Central Park, staring up at the sunlight filtering through the trees. It wasn't as satisfying to be out here these days, now that he had no one to share it with... but some part of him still felt more at home here than he did cooped up in an apartment. If only he could have had Claude out here with him, it would have been perfect.<p>

For a moment, he let himself indulge in a trip down memory lane. He was risking a flashback, he knew, but sometimes it was worth it... worth it to feel the comfort of being surrounded by those he loved in a time when his life had still made sense. It was easy to picture them -- too easy, really. Looking out across the lawn, he called their images to mind. Claude, of course, would be sprawled out before him, head in Berger's lap, gazing dreamily up into his eyes -- of course, he'd claim he'd been staring at the clouds, but they all knew better. Woof would be curled up nearby -- he'd always been drawn to Berger and Claude, but never had the courage to intrude unless he was invited. Crissy would be over by the flower patches with Angela, weaving garlands of daisies to drape over her girlfriend's hair while they both giggled over some boy. Jeanie... where would Jeanie be? Ah, yes. Jeanie would be near Claude's legs, maybe with a hand draped

over one of them, wishing desperately to be closer, but like Woof, not daring enough to intrude. And Sheila... what about Sheila? Ignoring the flash of pain thinking about her always produced, Berger pictured her in painstaking detail. There would be a gentle smile on her face and long blonde hair falling over one shoulder as her sparkling blue eyes gazed down at the two men she loved. She would be standing over them, earnestly guarding their repose like a collie with only two sheep.

Feeling the peace of memory wash fully over him, he let out a pleased sigh. He missed those days. Life had been so simple then, so uncomplicated. He'd known where he belonged and who he belonged with. He'd known his purpose... or thought he had. This time his sigh was weary. Those days were long gone and no one knew it better than he. Disillusioned by his own thoughts, Berger opened his eyes... and immediately cursed. He knew he'd been risking a flashback with what he'd done so deliberately, but he hadn't thought he'd bring one on so quickly, or that it would feel so real once he had! The face above his smiled gently and the slender body attached reached out a hand to touch his face. He jerked away before that hand could make contact. He didn't need this, not now, but at least he knew how to deal with it. From experience, he knew that a direct confrontation usually dissipated these milder flashbacks. Cursing again, he clenched his fists and stood up to face his memory's apparition. It was still there. And this time, she held out that hand in entreaty, a sorrowful look on her face, "I'm so sorry, Banana-Berger. I... I didn't mean to startle you. I shouldn't have even... you just looked so peaceful... I'm sorry."

Well... that was weird. The girl in his memory would never have apologized to him like that. She'd have considered it her G-d given right to disturb him whenever she wished. Something was wrong, here. Taking a closer look at the apparition, Berger started to notice more things that were out of place. For one thing... there were tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. For another... he'd never have pictured her in a smart little skirt-suit. Mouth dropping open as he realized that this was no drug flashback but was real, he almost choked on her name as he spoke it, "Sheila??"

A hopeful look entered those wide blue eyes, "You... you know me?"

Berger could only stare, "What? Of course I..." Then he paused. Wait... there was no 'of course' about this. The last time Sheila had seen him, he'd been completely stark-raving mad and high on about 4 different kinds of drugs... and as he'd just been pondering earlier, no one had contacted her to tell her that that was no longer the case. Oh good G-d. Now that he thought about it, he didn't think they'd even contacted her to tell her that Claude was alive. Now that really had been unfair. Apparently that was all a moot point, now. What the hell she was doing in New York, he didn't know -- according to Jeanie, she'd been living in D.C. -- but she was here, and he had no idea what to do with her.

She seemed to realize that something was wrong and pulled her hand back, "Berger..." She did a swift reassessment of him, eyes running up and down his tense form from the tips of his shoes to the top of his head, cataloguing all the differences she hadn't noted before. He was sure he could list most of them: clean hair; new, warm coat; sturdy, sensible shoes; full awareness in his eyes; well-filled out



muscle in his arms and legs, no hollows in his cheeks... clearly not the picture she'd been expecting when she found him. Eventually, her eyes snapped back up to meet his, "You... what happened?"

Oh... that was bad. He opened his mouth to answer, but couldn't think of a single thing to say. Claude was supposed to have been here when this happened! He couldn't do this alone! Eventually, he managed a strangled, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Seeing those shining blue eyes fracture in front of him made him add another mental curse to the list. Why could he never seem to say anything that didn't hurt her in some way? Occasionally he did it to Claude, but not nearly with the frequency he'd always done it to her and Claude usually gave it back as good as he got. He didn't just stare at him out of wounded, shining eyes, as though he was a martyr waiting for the next blow to fall. It was just one of the reasons why once the other man had been taken out of their threesome, they'd been unable to hold it together without him.

Sheila pulled herself up straighter and wiped surreptitiously at her eyes. Her voice was quiet as she spoke, "Jeanie... you remember her, right?" Not wanting to explain any of the thoughts running circles through his head, he just nodded. She continued, "She invited me up to New York for a few days, said she wanted to pick my brains about some things that happened... back in '67." He could easily hear the words she didn't add -- when Claude was drafted. It made him want to grab her and shake her and tell her that it was OK to talk about him now. He hadn't realized how much his condition had damaged those around him... not to mention the disservice it had done to Claude. If he really had been dead... his friends should have been allowed to remember him for the joy he'd brought to all of them, not for the emotional wreckage he'd left behind. Shamed by the thought, Berger forced his attention back to Sheila's words, "I... Since I was going to be here, anyway, and it was on the way from the hotel, I thought I'd stop in the park. Then I saw you..." She paused again, then took a step closer, a puzzled frown overtaking her face, "Berger... maybe I'm reading too much into this, but you're..."

With a bitter smile, he finished her sentence, "...sane?"

Her frown deepened, and she huffed, "I was going to say 'sober'."

He looked away, unable to meet the accusation in those eyes, "Well, to answer your question... I'm both. Mostly."

Her frown gave way to a gentle smile, "I'm glad." At his disbelieving look, her smile widened, "No, really, I am. I almost don't care how it happened, I'm just glad it did." The nearby church's bell suddenly clanged out the hour and Sheila jerked. Looking down at her watch, she stamped her foot, "Shoot. I'm late." Looking up at him, clearly torn, she started shifting from foot to foot.

Unable to take her fidgeting anymore, Berger let his tense posture relax, "Look, I know where Jeanie lives. Why don't I meet you there later and we'll talk, OK?"

Her tension faded into a look of pure relief and she nodded, "I'd like that." Their parting was awkward. Sheila clearly wanted to pull him close in an embrace, and Berger was just as obviously shy of physical contact... at least with her. He finally settled for patting

her awkwardly on the shoulder and letting her give him an equally awkward kiss on the cheek.

The minute she was away, Berger practically flew back to the apartment to call Jeanie. This situation was volatile enough... he did not want Sheila knowing about Claude before they got there later. The second he heard Jeanie's voice at the other end of the phone, he started yelling. It started with, "What the **\*\*hell\*\*** where you thinking??" and got worse from there.

When he finally paused for breath, she screamed back, "I can't tell you and you weren't supposed to find out yet, anyway!!"

Shocked that she'd had a response ready, Berger gaped for a moment. Jeanie, more calmly now, added, "I'm sorry. I had hoped to have her here and gone before either of you had a chance to know she'd been here. I should have known it wouldn't be that simple. Fate takes far too active an interest in all of us." Then there was a big sigh, "Look, I won't mention Claude and I won't talk to her about you. I assume you'll be coming here once Claude gets out of work?"

"Yeah... I think that's the only thing that makes sense at this point," was his response.

Finally sounding back in control, Jeanie said, "OK, then I'll make sure we have something available for dinner. And I think we'll just keep it to the four of us. In fact... It's Friday. I'll send my Claude over to a friend's house for the night. I don't think we need him cluttering up the situation, either."

Letting out a breath of relief, Berger thanked her. She just groaned in response, "Don't thank me. This whole damned mess is my fault to begin with. I should have just left Claude with you two and gone down to D.C. instead of inviting her up here, but I just didn't think." Another sigh, "Well, maybe it's for the best. We'll deal with it... like always." There was a pause, then a short curse, "I gotta go, Berger. I think she's here. I'll see you guys later."

She gave him just enough time to say 'Goodbye,' then hung up. Berger stared down at the phone in his hand for a moment, then cursed. He hadn't thought, either... Claude had always been a match for Sheila, even at her most pedantic, but with him already so exhausted from last night, he wouldn't exactly be at his best for a confrontation with her. And she was sure to be in rare form when she found out that he was alive and well... and that they'd been with each other all this time, not telling her. It reeked of deceit, even if they hadn't intended it that way. This had the potential to be very, very bad. Hanging up the phone, Berger let out a quiet whimper. Why couldn't he ever do anything right?

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:\*\*

Berger: \*twitch\* Just can't cut anyone any slack can she?

Claude: \*wince\* You're telling me.

R-chan: \*snerts\* Oh please, I've been nice.

Berger/Claude: \*disbelieving looks\*

R-chan: \*sweats\* Mostly...

Questions, comments, pineapples? ^\_^

\_Coming Soon: \_Berger breaks the news to Claude that Sheila's back in town... and their first reunion most definitely does not go as expected.

## 2. Chapter 2

\*\*\_February 12, 2010:\_\*\* Claude finally finds out that Sheila is back in town... and Sheila finds out about Claude. Neither one takes it very well.

\_This guy's walking down a street, when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep, he can't get out. A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up "Hey you! Can you help me out?" The doctor writes him a prescription, throws it down the hole and moves on.\_

\_Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up "Father, I'm down in this hole, can you help me out?" The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on.\_

\_Then a friend walks by. "Hey Joe, it's me, can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole!\_

\_Our guy says "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here!" and the friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."\_

\_--Leo McGarry to Josh Lyman in the episode "Noel", of "The West Wing"\_

\*\*\_Warnings:\_\*\* Still slash. ^\_^ Strong PG-13, dipping its toes into 'R' territory here and there. Enjoy?

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><p><strong><em>I Believe in Love<em>\*\*  
>by <em>Renee-chan<em>

When Claude finally got home at 4 o'clock, Berger was climbing the walls. No matter what he did, he couldn't think of a way to fix this without making it worse than it already was. He'd always been better at breaking things down than building them up. And Claude... oh, Claude. He looked like a gentle spring breeze would knock him right over. His face was pale, eyes half-glazed... it was a wonder that he'd made it through the school day. Wordlessly, he pulled the other man into the apartment and into a gentle embrace. Claude folded against him, tucking his head into Berger's neck like a child trying to block out the world.

Murmuring soothing nonsenses all the while, Berger got the door closed and got them both over to the couch. Claude didn't say a word through any of it. Eventually, the slight tremors running through his frame eased and he relaxed against Berger's side. Berger ran his fingers through his lover's hair and simply said, "I take it you

didn't have a great day, huh?"

Claude's answer was a snort as he pulled himself upright, "I've had worse... but not much worse." Raising a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, he let out an exhausted sigh, "I just want to crawl into bed and stay there all weekend."

It was a nice image -- one Berger could warm up to all too easily -- but unfortunately, it wasn't going to happen. He rose from the couch and walked over to the little curio cabinet where Claude kept his more fragile keepsakes. He started turning them this way and that, picking one up and moving it to a different spot, then moving it back. Now that the moment had come, he just couldn't bring himself to add one more burden to his lover's already overburdened shoulders.

Fortunately, Claude had long since gotten used to reading between the lines of what Berger did... and didn't... say. He, too, rose from the couch and walked over to where Berger was fidgeting with the figurines. He said, "OK, I'd have to be blind to miss this sign. What's on your mind, Berger?"

A wince. He still hadn't figured out a good way to explain what had happened earlier, and it wasn't even like it was his fault! He was just the bearer of bad tidings. Finally, he just blurted it out, "I saw Sheila, today."

When no response was forthcoming, he turned to look at Claude just in time to see his face go a few shades paler and to catch him as his knees buckled. Well, \_shit\_. That had obviously been the wrong approach. Getting them back over to the couch, he laid Claude back against the cushions and settled himself between the other man's legs twining his own around them. They'd sat like this often when they were younger... only Sheila had always been there, too, her own legs providing a cushion for Claude's head as she leaned over them both. Maybe provoking that imagery wasn't the greatest idea, but laying like this had always comforted Claude in the past, and he couldn't think of anything else to do.

Eventually, Claude's eyes cleared and he reached a shaking hand up to ghost along Berger's cheek, "You couldn't have eased me into that one, could you?"

Berger ducked his head, relief at not having permanently harmed the one he cared most about warring with the hint of mischief that always edged his thoughts, "I couldn't think of any better way to tell you... so I thought it was better just to say it."

Seeing that hint of mischief, and the hope rising in Berger's eyes that he was going to be forgiven for his newest screw-up settled Claude like nothing else on Earth would have. He let out a weary chuckle, "You never change, do you? I can't even be mad at you for it. Hell, I think it's half of why I fell in love with you to begin with."

Berger let a small smile dance across his face as he caught Claude's roaming hand and pressed a kiss to his palm, then leaned forward and stole one from his lips. When he sat back up, Claude's smile finally looked a little more solid, so he took that as a hint that he could safely explain without worrying about Claude half-fainting again,

"You remember all those months ago when Jeanie had us and Crissy over for dinner? When she was asking all those questions about that time right around when you were drafted?"

Claude's eyes darkened, "How could I forget? I got my first memories of Nam back that night. What about it?"

"Well, apparently we're not the only ones she's talking to. She's the reason Sheila's here. She wanted to get her stories, too," Berger concluded.

Claude lips pulled down into a puzzled frown, "Do you think she's been in contact with anyone else?"

Berger shrugged, "Don't know, didn't ask." Eyes brightening, he momentarily bounced in place on the couch, "But we can ask when we go over for dinner, tonight!" Gazing back down at his lover, he noted that Claude's eyes were once again glazed and he leaned over, worriedly asking, "Claudio?"

The response he got was not the one he'd been expecting. Claude wrapped his arms around Berger's neck and pulled him down for an intense, devouring kiss. All Berger could think in response was, Huh?, but he didn't let that stop him for long. Claude didn't often take the initiative like this, but Berger was always glad to see it happen when he did. Now what had brought that on...? It was with a wicked chuckle that he realized what had done it and experimentally bounced on the couch again. Claude's hips involuntarily bucked up against him in response and Berger's grin slid into a full-fledged smirk. The random flipping from the bad kind of tension to this kind of tension wasn't entirely unknown to them and it might be exactly what his lover needed to regain his balance for when they went over to Jeanie's tonight... eventually.

\* \* \*

><p>When they reached Jeanie's apartment building, it was to run into Cloud on his way down the stairs and out the door. The boy paused, eyeing the two of them for a moment before slumping with an, "Aw, damn. I just knew I was going to miss something good."<p>

Claude just raised an eyebrow and the kid blushed. It always caused a momentary pang in Berger's heart as he watched the two of them. In many ways, Claude was the only "father" the kid had ever known. He'd been raised on story after story about the man Jeanie had loved, the man she'd wished truly had been his father, and when they'd finally met in the flesh... Claude fit with them in a way Berger never really would. It made him sad sometimes, to think he'd been the reason that Claude didn't have this -- a home with a family, children to love and protect. He thought about them often, those children. Maybe there would be a boy -- a young man that would have his father's strength and idealism, his warm, earth-strong, brown eyes. Maybe there would have been a girl, too -- with long, shining locks of hair floating about her face, possessing her father's beauty and grace, and deeply caring and nurturing heart. It haunted him, the images of those children that Claude would never have.

Before he could finish wallowing in the guilt those kind of thoughts always brought, a warm hand sought out his and gave it a gentle squeeze. The look in his lover's eyes was almost painful to see --

the sheer understanding and forgiveness in that gaze, not to mention the depth of the love -- and it left him feeling a little humbled, like always. He raised Claude's hand to his lips and brushed a butterfly kiss over the knuckles to let him know he was done moping. Neither of them could afford to be distracted by regrets tonight.

Cloud, for his part, had a hip cocked and his arms crossed over his chest. He smirked down at the two of them and said, "You know... it gives me hope, watching you two." Ignoring Claude's suddenly sharp look, the boy continued, "I mean, they say a man's libido peaks at 18, but just look at you guys! It warms my heart, really it does."

Claude aimed a swat at the boy's backside, but whether Cloud was too fast or Claude had deliberately been too slow, it never connected. Cloud danced out of the way and skipped down the rest of that flight of stairs, out of reach. Claude just shook his head, then smiled wickedly as he said, "Have fun at Zack's, tonight."

The boy blinked innocently up at him, "What makes you think I'm going to Zack's?"

Giving the younger man a you-must-be-kidding-me look, Claude pointed out his skin-tight tee-shirt and the jeans he was wearing that looked like they'd been painted on. It was with a jolt that Berger realized what the undercurrents of the conversation meant, and another jolt when he realized that the "kid" was 16... almost a man. He and Claude had met when they were 16. Caught in that revelation, he missed the end of the conversation.

A hand on his cheek abruptly brought Berger back to the world to meet Claude's worried eyes -- eyes that silently asked if they needed to go back home so he could retreat from things for a while. He snorted and shook his head, then urgently whispered, "Do you realize what he's going to get up to when he goes to his friend's house tonight?" He had no idea why the thought was bothering him, except that the kid was the closest thing Claude had to a child of his own... and fathers were supposed to be bothered by that sort of thing.

Claude just smirked, "Who do you think gave them the push that landed them in bed together in the first place?" At Berger's shell-shocked look, Claude's expression softened, "Berger... I may be a father figure to him, but I'm not his father. Lord knows, I got up to my own fair share of trouble, romantic and otherwise, when I was his age..." A lifted eyebrow to acknowledge that more than a fair share of the "trouble" had involved Berger, "...and my lack of connection with my father is what drove me into my more wild acts of rebellion. He needs an understanding ear far more than he needs a scolding parent."

Seeing that Berger's eyes still reflected a touch of uncertainty, Claude stepped down to join him on the landing and wrapped his arms around the other man, "I don't regret a moment of my time with you and I've lost nothing that I cared about losing. I was never destined to live the life with the wife, the dog and the 2.5 kids--"

Berger finished the long-standing harangue with him, "--in the house behind the white picket fence."

Claude gave him a broad smile, "Exactly. That was my father's dream, not mine." The smile softened, "My dreams have only ever had room for one other person... and that's you."

Berger met his eyes with naked relief and heartfelt sentiment for just barely a moment before looking away and snorting, "You're such a sap, you know that?"

Claude's laugh was muffled in the fabric of Berger's jacket, but was no less forceful for that, "You can never be serious, even for a minute, can you?"

The smirk that met Claude's lifted face was pure mischief, "I've been known to manage 30 seconds on occasion."

A snort to indicate what he thought of that possibility. Hearts renewed by the moment of connection and laughter, both men glanced up the remaining flights of stairs. Quietly, Claude asked, "Are you ready for this?"

"Nope. You?" was the response.

Claude shook his head, "If I had a year to prepare, I still wouldn't be ready for this."

Holding out an arm to his lover, Berger just raised an eyebrow, "Should we do it anyway?"

With another sigh, Claude just nodded and let Berger lead him up the rest of the stairs.

\* \* \*

><p>In unspoken agreement, Claude tucked himself to the side of the door where he wouldn't be seen at first glance and let Berger knock for both of them. When Jeanie opened the door, her eyes flicked around looking for him. When she spotted him to the right of the door, her eyes filled with understanding. She let Berger in and left the door open behind him.<p>

Berger stepped into Jeanie's living room, easily spotting Sheila where she was just rising from the sofa. Jeanie's voice cut through the potential awkwardness of the greeting, "I know you two remember each other, so I'm not going to bother with introductions. But Berger, you may be interested to know that Sheila's married, now."

Sheila's eyes landed on her old friend, as though puzzled as to why it was so important for her to share that information that she couldn't have waited for the flow of conversation to bring them there, naturally. Jeanie just smiled.

For his part, Berger figured that made things simpler... and at the same time, didn't help at all. It was nice of Jeanie to try to reassure them right off the bat, but it had already been highly unlikely that Sheila would randomly leave her new life to try to come back to them. And really... it didn't matter. Because it didn't mean the hurt at having been left out in the first place would be any less. Berger started to sweat from the pressure of, yet again, having to break shocking news to someone he cared about. He should have

asked Claude what to say when he'd had the chance... Eventually, he figured that what had almost worked for him before might go... at least not any more badly than the first time, so he just blurted it out, "Sheila... Claude's alive."

The loud "thunk" from just outside the door that had to be Claude's head hitting the wall made Berger wince. Sheila, for her part, was glaring into his eyes, an extremely hurt look on her face. She folded her arms over her chest as she glowered, "You know Berger... after all these years, I still thought that there were lows to which you wouldn't stoop. Clearly I was wrong."

Berger tried to interrupt her, but she ran right over him, "No! I don't want excuses. I don't want to hear any more explanations that won't add up. I've watched you destroy your life right from the front row for years, Berger. I can't do it anymore. I have a husband who loves me and three fabulous children. I have a home and a good job. I don't need this anymore. I don't need you trying to fuck it all up for me!" Rounding angrily on Jeanie, she added, "I don't know what the hell kind of games you're playing at here, but I'm no longer interested. I'm leaving."

Pushing past Berger to get into the hall, she was clearly surprised to be blocked by another body. When she looked up, no doubt to deliver another blistering monologue, she abruptly froze, mouth still open. Claude said quietly into the silence, "This is no game, Sheila. That I can promise you." Taking her arm gently in one hand, he pushed her back inside and closed the door behind him.

Sheila jerked away from him as though the touch burned and then scurried to get the length of the sofa between them. Her face was white and her eyes huge and terrified, "You... you're dead." Before anyone could open their mouths to explain, Sheila's voice rose into tones of near hysteria, "You died 14 years ago!!"

Berger noted with absolute wonder that there were tears tracking down Sheila's face. It was a dissonant note in his memories of her. Sheila didn't cry -- not like this, not because she couldn't control the emotions raging through her. Seeing her break down like that... it made him feel unstable. Sheila was the strong one. She didn't fall apart in public. This was just wrong. Like "Claude the tweed-clad history teacher", a weak Sheila didn't jive with his image of what Sheila was. Had they all really changed that much?

Maybe it was all the practice he'd had lately at comforting someone, or maybe it was just because he'd never seen Sheila so vulnerable -- whatever the case, Berger couldn't take it anymore. Stepping away from Claude, he went to Sheila's side, pulled her into a gentle embrace and started rocking her back and forth. She buried her face in his shirt and sobbed -- lost, broken-hearted sobs like a little child. It made him want to weep in response.

Looking up, he saw Claude watching them, that same disconnected, slightly left-out and broken look he'd always worn when watching he and Sheila together plastered all over his face. Berger hadn't seen that look in 16 years and seeing it now was like a punch to the gut. Maybe they hadn't changed as much as he'd thought... Not in the ways that mattered. Well, this just wouldn't do. He wasn't trying to shut Claude out... he just couldn't stand to see Sheila cry. Letting a hint of his irritation creep into his face, he jerked his



head to indicate that Claude should join him. And he did... hesitantly. Claude's arms reached around both of them, snuggling around them like he'd always done, as though willing to shelter them both, but unwilling to get between them to really join the embrace. Well, this time Berger wasn't having it. He knew better now. Freeing one arm from around Sheila, he slipped it around Claude's waist. Claude jumped like a skittish horse, but calmed at the understanding look in Berger's eyes. He wasn't being abandoned, would **\*\*never\*\*** be abandoned. Especially not now.

After a time, Sheila's tears slowed and she backed away from the two of them, flushed and embarrassed. Then she stared up at Claude, wonderment breaking through the darker emotions to light up her face, "Claude... is it really you? You're really alive?"

Claude tilted his head to look over at Jeanie and commented philosophically, "You know... that question is getting a little tiresome. Maybe we should just have one gigantic reunion so I can answer it for everyone all at once. What do you say?"

Jeanie unexpectedly ducked her head and wouldn't meet their eyes. Finally, she sighed, "I'm working on it, OK? That was part of what you weren't supposed to know yet. Just... just give me a few more months, all right?"

That was the moment when Sheila chose to swat Berger upside the back of the head, "You jerk! You couldn't have told me he was alive when you saw me before??"

Berger stared for a moment before finding the voice to answer, "And you'd have reacted better if I told you in the park when you still thought I was mad and Claude wasn't nearby as proof?"

This time the blush was more intense, "That's... that's a good point. And I guess I owe you an apology for all that I said earlier..."

Just glad that he'd found a way to fix some small part of the pain he'd caused her, Berger shrugged, "Spilled milk, water under the bridge, doesn't matter. We're cool, now, right?"

Sheila hesitated only a moment, then nodded and held out her hand. Doubtless she wanted it shaken... Berger used it to pull her into another embrace, instead. Sheila just laughed and planted a friendly kiss on his lips, "We're cool, Banana-Berger. We're cool."

Claude's voice broke through the celebrating -- and if there was a cold edge to it, Berger was the only one who picked up on it, "Then if we're all cool and no one's going to start yelling again... Jeanie, I think you mentioned food?"

Jeanie raised an eyebrow, "After all that, you're hungry?"

Claude sighed as he shook his head, "No, not really. But for one thing, if I don't eat, it makes Berger upset." He ignored Berger's muttered, 'Damned right, it does,' and continued, "And for another thing, I'm going to need a base for all the alcohol I'm going to have to drink to get through this story one more time."

Sheila's face paled at those bitter words, but she agreed readily

enough to go into the kitchen to help Jeanie get dinner on the table.

Berger, eyes troubled, stepped up to where Claude was perched on the couch arm... their couch. He ran a gentle hand through Claude's hair, letting it come to rest on the back of the other man's neck, "You sure that's a good idea, Claudio?"

Face looking more grim than Berger liked, Claude shook his head, "No, actually, I'm quite sure it isn't. I just don't see any other way. Facing those memories is hard enough drunk... I'm in no hurry to try it sober. Especially not after last night. But Sheila... she's not going to be satisfied with me telling her that I was in the war and then I was home with amnesia. She's going to want to know why. And whether I answer her or not, the memories will still be there. It'll be easier this way... for all of us."

Berger frowned, sure there was a fault in that logic somewhere, but unable to find it. He pulled Claude up against him and the other man quickly turned his face into Berger's stomach as though to hide from the world. Berger just kept lightly stroking his hands down Claude's hair, then his neck, then his back. Right now he didn't know how, but he would protect Claude... even if the person he had to protect him from was himself.

\* \* \*

><p>Dinner was a strained affair. Claude ate with single-minded determination, focused on his task to the exclusion of conversation. Sheila kept darting glances at him, as though torn between wanting to get closer to reassure herself he was real... and wanting to flee as far from him as she could to get away from the memories his presence evoked. Berger hovered as close to Claude as the current seating arrangement would allow, mind furiously working on the problem of how to get through the night with the least possible emotional scarring for all concerned. Jeanie, sensing the strain and keenly aware of her part in creating this situation, kept up a nearly endless stream of chatter, desperately trying to keep the tone of the meal light.<p>

When they moved to the living room and Claude started to reach for the liquor cabinet, Berger realized his time to come up with a brilliant solution had just run out. Praying he wasn't about to make a bad situation worse, he played the only card he had -- he parked himself on the floor in front of the cabinet as a living barrier. He could hear Jeanie catch her breath as Claude's eyes met his, an irritated frown on his face, but couldn't spare her a thought. He just met Claude's eyes, stare for stare, and slowly shook his head. Claude's frown deepened, "Berger..."

Berger forced a cheerful smile onto his face, "Yes, Claudio?" This time it was Sheila's turn to catch her breath -- probably at the memories evoked by that nickname. He ignored her, too.

Unable to maintain a sour faade when Berger was smiling so brightly at him, Claude slumped and let out a broken whisper, "What do you want from me?"

It was a moment's work to worm between Claude's legs and get up on his knees to see him eye to eye, "It's not about what I want from

you... it's about what I want for you." When Claude looked like he was ready to hear the rest, Berger continued, "I've walked this road, Claude. It doesn't lead anywhere good. You can trust me on that one."

When Claude opened his mouth to protest, Berger grabbed his face in his hands and said in a low, anguished voice, "I don't want to be running out in the middle of the night, seconds before a storm to drag you out from under a bridge. Claude... I don't want that."

It took Claude a second to catch the reference, and when he did, something in his eyes broke, "Berger...?"

The long-haired man just shook his head, "How do you think I ended up in that state to begin with, Claude? I was running from memories of you... and visions of how you died." Taking a deep breath, Berger pulled Claude down to touch his forehead to the other man's, "I only just got you back. I **\*\*will not\*\*** lose you again so soon, even to this."

The tableau held for another few seconds before Claude's face broke into a small, wry grin, "I think that was a personal best, Berger. What would you say it was? 45 seconds?"

Berger snorted, "Now, now, you see here. You don't get to steal my shtick. Not at this point in the game. You can't try to take my substance abuse one moment, then a heartbeat later try to take my inability to maintain a serious conversation, too. Especially not if you're going to use it to try to duck out of a conversation that even I think we need to be serious about."

The wry smile slowly warmed into a real one, "Fair enough, love. Well, then, since you seem to be the only sensible one among us tonight, what do you suggest?"

Berger turned to face Sheila, "You want the story?"

Sheila hesitated, but nature will win out almost every time. In the end, she nodded, "I'd like the story."

Berger turned around to look at Jeanie, "Then you tell her. I'm taking Claude home. I think he's had enough stress for one day."

With a huff of laughter for the simplicity of Berger's solution, and a promise to stop by just to spend some time with the girls tomorrow, Claude let himself be led away from the apartment. He tried twice to get Berger to slow down, then finally gave up and let the other man drag him where he would. He didn't raise another protest until they reached their apartment and Berger continued in his single-minded walk... right past it. Pulling back on Berger's hand, he said, "Berger! I thought we were going home. We just passed the apartment... where are we going?" Berger shook his head and started walking faster, still not having any of Claude's attempts to stay him in his flight. Claude raised one more protest when Berger ducked them down into the subway tunnels, but Berger wasn't stopping and he wasn't explaining. He didn't slow until he'd reached his destination: at the park... and the Bridge.

When they got there, Berger still gripping his hand tightly, Claude

couldn't even make himself ask the question. This was a place he tried not to ever visit -- it held too many bad memories. He couldn't even imagine what Berger could want to see or do in this place, especially as he thought they'd settled their drama back at Jeanie's apartment. Voice gentle, he called his lover's name, "Berger?"

Finally, Berger spoke, voice low and intense, "I'm not sure you were really hearing me before. I'm not Sheila and I know you better than that. You diverted me at Jeanie's, but I'm not gonna let you divert me here. If I have to hit you with a sledgehammer to get you to see what I'm talking about, then I will." Eyes raising to bore into Claude's, Berger held up a hand and pointed stiffly at the bridge, "There are no answers, there is no protection, in the bottom of a bottle or the inside of a syringe. It's an illusion. It's a way of ducking your head under the covers and ignoring the earthquake shaking the entire house down on top of you. This is where those things lead you in the end." He spun Claude to face him, gripping his shoulders tightly, "I lost 13 years of my life to that false promise and I **\*\*refuse\*\*** to let you do the same. Do you hear me??"

Startled by Berger's eloquence and the vehemence in his normally free-spirited, laid-back lover's eyes, Claude could only nod. Berger relaxed his hold and let a smile touch his lips, "From now on, if you need to run, don't run away... run to me. I can take it."

Stunned by how clearly Berger had seen him all this time and how little he'd managed to hide from him, Claude finally relaxed his hold on control. His control all this time had been mostly illusion anyway, a desperate attempt to pretend that he was still untouched by the tragedy that had been Viet Nam. He'd talked to his students about it, sure, as though he'd played no part in it. They'd assumed he'd used college as a way to dodge the draft and he'd let them. It had allowed him to continue the charade that he was untouched by those memories. Well, he didn't have that luxury any more. And if he had to take a little time and fall to pieces, Berger was determined to give him that time. Wrapping his arms securely around his lover, Berger led them both home.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:\*\*

Comments? Questions? Rutabagas?

Berger: *\*twitch\** Rutabagas? Where the hell does she come up with this stuff? At least pineapples are fruit.

R-chan: *\*snickers\**

Berger: *\*double twitch\** Really? We're really going there?

Claude: *\*sighs\** I think we've not only been there, but we've bought the t-shirt.

\* \* \*

><br>Coming Soon: Finally our trio get a chance to hash out their differences and try to find a new balance. Unfortunately, with so much pain between them, it won't be easy.

### 3. Chapter 3

**\*\*\_February 14, 2010:\_\*\*** Day late and a dollar short. Sorry about that -- it's been kind of a crappy week. :-P Out of deference to everyone else who I'm sure enjoys the holiday, I won't give you my usual Valentine's Day rant-fest. Instead, I'll just leave you with Part 3.

It's been 16 years since our hapless trio last had a chance to be together. With so much anger and pain still between them, will they ever be able to regain their balance?

**\*\*\_Warnings:\_\*\*** Still slash. ^\_^ Strong PG-13, dipping its toes into 'R' territory here and there. Enjoy?

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em><br>I Believe in Love\_\*\*  
>by <em>Renee-chan<em>

After a good night's sleep, Berger was pleased to note that Claude was looking better. The pallor had left his cheeks and his eyes had regained some of their shine. More importantly, he'd had no nightmares that night. Whatever the reason for that not-so-small blessing, Berger was grateful.

Leaning over the other man, he gently brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. Claude smiled an impish grin up at him and raised his arms over his head in a somewhat provocative stretch. Berger just smiled at the display, "Good morning, starshine."

Claude let one of his hands drift over to play in Berger's curls, "Good morning, yourself."

With a small huff of a laugh, Berger planted a gentle kiss to the tip of Claude's nose, laughing again when his lover's eyes almost crossed trying to see him do it. Running his hands through Claude's hair again, he enticed a thoughtful frown to drift across his face, "This is starting to look a little shaggy... isn't it about time you got it cut?"

To his surprise, Claude's cheeks reddened at that question and he turned his head into the pillow to mumble something. Not one to be put off that easily, Berger tilted his head to peer down at his lover, an eyebrow raised, "I didn't catch that..."

Claude cleared his throat, then turned back to look up at Berger. His voice was hesitant and lilted upwards at the end as though asking a question, "I was thinking of growing it out again..."

The sudden intense sense memory of burying his hands and face in Claude's once thick, honey blonde hair... surrounding himself in its luxurious, silky length... inhaling the scent of vanilla that always seemed to emanate from it whether Claude had washed it recently or not... overwhelmed him. Giving a soft groan, he buried his head in the crook of Claude's neck. Claude let out a soft laugh from underneath him as he wrapped his arms around Berger's nearly trembling form, "I take it you approve of that thought?" Berger

pressed his face further into Claude's neck, nodding vigorously.

Claude tightened his arms around him, "I thought about it once or twice before now, but I was afraid the school board might not approve. But now... I don't think I care. This isn't Kansas and they like me too much to fire me over something that silly... and it feels right." At that comment, Berger lifted his head, a worried frown on his face. Before he could voice that concern, however, Claude shook his head, "Don't you see? It's the last piece. It was the first thing they took away from me, so it makes sense that it should be the final thing that I should reclaim." Placing a gentle hand against Berger's cheek, he smiled, "It'll be fine. Really, it'll be fine." Smirking at the way Berger was still pressed so tightly to him, he concluded with, "And don't try to pretend now that you don't want me to do it."

Berger contemplated a pout for a moment before throwing off the idea for a wicked grin, "All right, then I won't." Leaning down to press a kiss to Claude's neck, he was severely disappointed when the man slipped out from underneath him. Berger lunged after him, but Claude danced out of the way, "Hey! No fair... I thought..."

Laughing on his way out of the bedroom, Claude said, "Nope. Remember, we promised we'd meet Jeanie and Sheila for lunch. It's almost noon already. If we don't hurry, we're going to be late."

Groaning, Berger buried his head in the pillow. He had forgotten. And while there was no question that he'd far rather spend the day in bed with Claude, he couldn't deny that they'd left a few severely damaged bridges in their wake yesterday. For everyone's sake, they were going to have to try to fix them. But, damn it, that didn't mean he had to like it!

\* \* \*

><p>Forty-five minutes and a fair amount of grumbling later, they'd finally gotten themselves out the door. Claude had called Jeanie before they left to get the address, but naturally, she didn't know the name of the hotel. She was certain that they'd be able to find it, though. She and Cloud, along with Crissy would be meeting them there. Once he saw the address, Claude cursed and claimed they didn't have enough time to walk it. They walked east past Washington Square Park to Lafayette and caught the subway going uptown. Claude got them off the subway at 68th and Lexington. As they got further and further uptown, Berger started to get more and more fidgety. The only reason he ever came this far uptown was to spend time in Central Park. Claude turned them left off of Lexington and over to Madison. When they reached 76th St. and still hadn't gotten to their destination, Berger grabbed his elbow to stop him, "OK, what hotel could she possibly be staying at that would put us up in this ritzy territory here?"<p>

Claude winced, "I was kind of hoping to not have to tell you until we got there."

Berger stared over at Claude in his khaki pants, crisp white collared shirt and dark green sweater, then eyed his own clothes. Claude had bullied him into one of his lesser damaged pair of jeans and one of his own black sweaters, but there was still a marked difference in

their states of dress. This was as dressed up as he ever got, but he hadn't thought it would make a difference. He figured they'd be hitting a diner, maybe a deli. Now, he wasn't so sure. For once in his life, he found himself worried that he would be weighed and measured... and found wanting. Berger frowned and crossed his arms over his chest, "I think maybe we've had enough surprises for the weekend, don't you?"

Hand clutching the piece of paper, Claude let out a heavy sigh, "I'm not totally sure, Berger... but I think this is the address for the Carlyle."

"The... what?" Eyes wide with shock, Berger put a hand to his head. It took another few minutes for the pieces to click together, but when they did, he was not happy. Backing up a pace, he raised a hand in a warding gesture, "Oh, no no no. There's no way in hell they'll even let me in the lobby of a place like that!"

After tucking the paper safely in his coat pocket, Claude caught at Berger's hands and pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead, "Easy... It's not going to be a problem, Berger. She will have left our names with the doorman. And you have as much of a right to be there as anyone else."

Bitter snort of laughter in response to that, "That's not what they said two winters ago."

Claude winced, "Well... things are different now." Berger turned his head to the side, unwilling to give an inch. Claude caught at his chin and turned his face back around, "They are, Berger. You're not some vagabond looking for shelter from the cold. You're just a man visiting an old friend for lunch. Trust me. It'll be fine."

Relaxing minutely at the surety in his lover's voice, Berger couldn't help but wonder at this new example of how much change the years had wrought. They used to make fun of people who stayed in ritzy-ditzy places like the Carlyle. They used to scoff at the idea of dressing differently or acting differently just to get those same people to accept them. Now look at them. Dressing to the nines and putting on their "best" behavior like an overcoat just to meet a friend for lunch. Looking into Claude's eyes and seeing the silent plea there, Berger caved, wondering the whole while if the piece of himself he'd just given up would ever be returned. Pulling his hands back and crossing his arms over his chest, he grumped, "You'll have to help me order. I probably won't recognize any of the stuff on the menu. And can we even afford to eat there?"

Sliding an arm through Berger's, Claude smiled, "Sheila said this is her treat, so I say order whatever the hell you feel like." Relieved that the preppy clothes and lunchtime venue hadn't changed anything significant in his lover, Berger also smiled, then disentangled his arm from Claude's to wrap it around his shoulders instead. Back at peace, they walked the remaining two blocks to the hotel.

Reaching the front door, however, Berger couldn't help another tremor of trepidation. In spite of Claude's brave words, he was just sure that he was going to do something crazy... or stupid... or just... Berger, and get them kicked out before they even reached the lobby. But before he even had a chance to voice those fears, Claude had his hand in a firm grip and was dragging him to the door.

It started to go wrong from minute one. The doorman gave them an extremely sour look down the length of his nose and in an equally sour voice demanded their names and business. Berger opened his mouth to give him a snippy answer when Claude squeezed his fingers lightly in warning and answered for them. It was... weird, hearing their names like that: Claude Bukowski and George Berger here for a lunch meeting with Sheila Kendall. Shit. He didn't think he'd ever even heard Claude call him by his first name, hadn't even thought the other man remembered it. Was this how the rich and important talked? In that moment, looking at Claude's bland, white-bread expression, Berger suddenly wasn't even sure he knew him. Then the doorman looked down at his list and Claude locked his eyes with Berger's... and rolled them. Berger couldn't help it, he snickered. The doorman looked back up, a different sour look in place before he waved them in, "You are expected. Room 1503. Elevators are to your left as you enter the lobby."

They made their way through the elegant lobby as quickly as they could and across to the elevators. When theirs arrived, however, both were a little surprised by the man in uniform inside it that politely queried, "Going up?"

A mischievous glint in his eye, Berger opened his mouth to say something that again, would no doubt get them in trouble, but another warning squeeze from Claude cut him off. Claude answered in that same bland voice he'd used on the doorman, "15th floor, please." The ride up that elevator was the longest Berger had ever experienced -- or at least it felt that way. With the presence of a third party, he couldn't say any of the things he normally would have in a situation like this and he was starting to sweat with the need to maintain that stoic silence. When the elevator finally reached the 15th floor, the bellhop seemed as relieved to see him go as he was to leave.

Following the signs on the walls, Claude quickly found them the right room and pounded on the door. Berger eyed him with bemusement -- apparently he wasn't the only one stressed by their current situation. Moments after his less-than-polite knocking, the door opened and Sheila gave them both a warm smile before ushering them inside, "I'm so glad you could both make it! You're the first to arrive." At Claude's questioning look, she explained, "Crissy called from the hospital to say she'd been paged to come in, but she hoped to be able to make it later... and I have no idea where Jeanie and her son are."

Berger and Claude shared a look that was part affectionate exasperation and part irritation. Finally Claude cleared his throat and said, "Well... neither Jeanie or Cloud can get anywhere on time to save their lives and when they're going somewhere together the effect seems to be multiplied five-fold." A sudden silence filled the room as they each realized in turn that they were going to be alone together for an unknown amount of time for the first time since Claude had been drafted. To Berger's utter shock, it was Claude who panicked. He stepped away from the two of them into the room, face a blank mask that Berger recognized all too well. It was the face he usually wore when nightmares of Viet Nam propelled him out of sleep. Damn it.

Determined to give the other man time to pull himself together,



Berger draped an arm around Sheila's shoulders and pulled her away from the door and over to the living room window. Turning on his most obnoxiously charming smile, Berger set out to entice Sheila's attention away from Claude's sudden discomfort and fascination with the suite's kitchenette. Well, at least he hadn't locked himself in the bathroom... "So, Sheila, you must have done pretty well for yourself, huh? Staying in a place like this, I mean."

Sheila frowned and turned as if to go after Claude, but Berger easily turned her back towards the window and shook his head. After a moment of watching his eyes silently pleading for cooperation, she finally backed down, "I suppose turnabout's fair play, isn't it?" Taking a deep breath, she pulled a smile out from somewhere and planted it firmly on her face, "After I left New York, I went down to DC to lobby against the war."

Berger winced, Oh shit. Bad topic choice. Gaze floating upwards, he was barely able to make out Claude's reflection in the window as he paused in the act of joining them and fled back the way he'd come. When he heard a door click shut, Berger cursed to himself as he realized that the other man had closed himself in the bathroom. Hearing the bathroom door shut and the lock slide home, Sheila caught on that she'd made a mistake. Her eyes took on an apologetic cast and she dropped all pretenses of holding a light conversation, "Damn it, Berger. I'm really sorry. Shoot. I didn't even mean to bring that up!" Clutching her hands in Berger's borrowed sweater, she met his eyes with tear-bright ones of her own, "Jeanie told me... she told me about..." Abruptly she broke away from him, "Damn it."

Running a hand over her immaculately groomed hair, Berger pulled her close in a brief but gentle hug, "It's OK, Sheila. Really... it is. He's just a little tense, I think."

Sheila stared up at him with an incredulous look, "A little tense? Berger, he's so upset with me he's hiding in the bathroom."

Vaguely amused snort for her misinterpretation, "I don't think he's upset with you, not really. I think he's scared of you."

Her voice dropping into a dry tone, Sheila repeated, "Scared of me." Berger easily recognized it as her 'you're being stupid and I'm just trying to give you a chance to figure it out on your own so I don't have to smack you' tone. It had been years since he'd last heard that tone, and he really hadn't missed it.

With a sigh, he stepped away from her to be able to look her in the eyes, "He's got a bit of a complex where we're concerned." At her disbelieving look, Berger nodded, "Really, it's true. I think that deep down inside, he's afraid that if he gives us the chance we're going to run off with each other and leave him alone." His voice quieted and roughened with emotion, "He doesn't really get it... that without him holding us together, we'd never have lasted as long as we did, anyway."

Sheila looked away, caught out by the truth of that statement, "I really did love you, you know."

Smiling, Berger ran a hand through her hair again, "I know you did. I really loved you, too. But once we were past the superficial attraction and mind-blowing sex that held us together to start with,

we would never have stayed together without Claude acting as a bridge between us." Cupping her cheek with one hand and real regret in his voice, Berger finished with, "Left to our own devices, we only ever managed to hurt each other."

Seeing that Sheila understood, Berger left her side to go to the bathroom door. Testing the knob, he found it unlocked. \_Now... when did you do that, Claudio? I heard you lock it when you went in here...\_ Pushing open the door, he found Claude perched on the toilet, head between his knees and hands laced together behind his head. Dropping down in front of him, Berger gently eased Claude's hands down from their tense grip on his hair and tipped his head up with a finger under his chin, "Hey, there, starshine."

Claude gave him a weak smile and gripped his free hand as though his life depended on it, "Hey, yourself."

Berger smiled back as he dropped his other hand from Claude's chin to rest it on his knee, "You plannin' on stayin' in here all day? Or were you gonna join us?"

Claude let out a shaky breath and hunched his shoulders over, "I don't know if I can do this, Berger -- go out there with the two of you and act like everything is OK between us."

Gently rubbing Claude's knee, Berger inched his way closer, "Claudio... no one said you have to act like everything is OK. We all know it's not. Maybe this is a blessing in disguise, yeah? A chance to clear the air before Jeanie and Cloud get here. What do you say?"

In answer, Claude stood and moved to the sink to splash some cold water on his face. When he raised his eyes to the mirror, Berger caught his gaze with a raised eyebrow. Claude nodded, "OK... I'll try."

Berger snorted as he bumped shoulders with his lover, "What is it with you and 'trying' these days? How's that line go? You know, from the movie that Cloud's been gushing over since they announced the release date for the third one? The one he made us promise to go see with him?"

Claude stared back at him, completely blank for a moment before doubling over with laughter. When he finally managed to straighten back up, his eyes had regained a little of their twinkle, "You mean 'Empire Strikes Back' and 'Return of the Jedi?'" At Berger's vigorous nodding, Claude started laughing again. Through his laughter, he managed to get out, "Do or do not, there is no try."

Eyes lighting up as he grinned in satisfaction, Berger grabbed Claude up into a tight hug from behind, hooking his head over the other man's shoulder, "That would be the one!"

Still snickering quietly, Claude dropped his hands to rest over Berger's where they were clasped around his waist, "OK, Berger. I get it. We'll go out there. We **\*\*will\*\*** find some way to clear the air and when Jeanie and Cloud get here, we will have a very pleasant lunch."

Berger's eyes took on a more serious cast as he prompted,

"And...?"

Though puzzled for a moment, Claude caught his breath when he finally understood, then he nodded, "And from now on, we'll try to deal with my nightmares when they happen... not when I collapse because I can't deal with the pressure anymore." Turning around in Berger's arms, he twined his own around Berger's neck and pressed their foreheads together, "I trust you and I think I'm ready to let you help me."

Berger smiled as he joined their lips in a gentle kiss, "Good... 'cuz you've been pretty well sucking at dealing with it on your own."

With a heavy sigh, Claude nodded, "I have, at that." Then he pressed their lips back together in a deeper, more insistent kiss.

And that was the moment Sheila chose to open the door. Both men turned to look at her as her mouth froze in the act of opening to speak. Before either could even start to offer an explanation, she squeaked and backpedaled out the door as quickly as she could, slamming it in both their faces in the process. Claude and Berger's eyes met, equally stunned, and then they both broke up into laughter. Berger was the one who regained enough control to speak first, "Well... that's certainly changed. If she'd caught us at that in 1967, she'd have come in the bathroom, locked the door and joined us."

Claude rolled his eyes, then planted a light kiss on Berger's cheek, "Come on, let's get out there before she hyperventilates."

Snickering, Berger followed Claude out of the bathroom. They found Sheila in the living room, pacing back and forth, a deep red flush racing from her neck all the way up to her ears. When she noticed them, she let out another little squeak and immediately began apologizing, "I should have knocked first. I'm so sorry. Really, I don't know what I was thinking!"

Claude stepped away from Berger to place a finger over Sheila's lips. Seeing her so unsettled seemed, ironically enough, to have settled him. He smiled down at the one-time third member of their trio, "It's not all your fault, Sheila -- we could have locked the door."

Blush quieting, Sheila finally raised her eyes to meet Claude's. It was the first time they'd had a chance to really get a look at each other since this whole mess started yesterday. Berger found himself catching his breath in anticipation. After a few moments of silent communion, Sheila's face finally relaxed into a smile, "You look good, Claude." Turning to include Berger in her gaze, her smile widened, "You both do." Eyes taking on a mischievous cast, she concluded with, "And let's face it... you always did look good together. I just... I'd forgotten how good. It's been a while and Brad... he's a good man, but he isn't exactly..." Pausing to search for a word, she finally settled on, "...adventurous."

Berger smirked as he wrapped an arm around Claude's waist, "You mean he doesn't bring home other men for you to share? That's a crying shame."

While Claude spluttered, Sheila lightly smacked Berger in the arm, "Banana-Berger, you are the only man I ever dated who brought home other men for me to share." Eyeing the two up and down, she wryly added, "And I'm understanding more and more that you really brought him home for yourself and just let me share because I happened to be there when you did."

Berger turned his gaze from Sheila to Claude and studied him for a long moment. Finally he grinned, "You know... you may be right at that. At least with this one. Most of the others... nah. I just knew you'd like 'em -- and besides, I learned in kindergarten that it's the right thing to do... to share with your friends."

Sheila, pointedly ignoring Berger's last comment, turned thoughtful, "You know... it's strange, looking back on it all, now. I think I knew that first time you brought him home, Berger. It was the first time I'd seen that look in your eyes. It was the first time that I realized that I might not get to keep you... and that if I didn't stand in the way, he would."

Berger watched his lover's eyes closely after that statement. Sheila couldn't have played it into his hands better if she tried. Then again, after that insight he'd shared with her earlier, she might have done it deliberately. Sure enough, Claude's eyes held a brighter shine -- whether it was from joy or tears almost didn't matter. He commented, "All that time, I thought it was you holding us together, Sheila."

Sheila just sadly shook her head, "Funny, really... in the end I think it was me holding you apart." Placing a gentle hand on each of their faces, she met each of their gazes in turn, "I loved you both, really I did, but I don't think I'd have been right for either of you alone. Berger, we were too different and Claude... we were too much alike. We would only ever have worked as a threesome."

Enfolding her in their embrace, they rested against each other. It was a moment caught outside of time, a return to the innocent togetherness of over a decade ago, but it gave them all comfort. That was one thing that Berger had been truly sorry to lose -- the unwavering support he'd always gotten from the two of them and the rest of the Tribe. It was that knowledge that his friends understood and accepted who he was, even loved him for it... even if he was more than a little crazy, even then. As much as his grief at losing Claude, the loss of that support had undone him nearly as badly.

Eventually Claude broke through the silence with a murmured plea, "I know we have things that need settling between us. I know we've all hurt each other more than can easily be forgiven... but is there any way we can just... forget about it and go back to being friends?"

After a minute, Sheila cleared her throat, "I've already mourned you both for more years than I care to count. I'm willing to forgive and forget if you are." Turning her head to the left, she asked, "Berger?"

Relief rushing through him like wildfire, Berger nodded, "I figure I've probably done the most to need to be let off the hook for, so if

you guys want to let it all slide, it's cool with me."

The round of laughter they shared put the final nail in the coffin of the tension between them... and that was when the knock came at the door. Claude spluttered back into laughter as he turned to look at Berger, "Well, at least her timing's improving."

Sheila frowned, "I'm guessing there's a story there..."

Berger joined Claude in his laughter, "There is. Maybe we'll even tell you later."

Claude added, "Much later. After lunch, for certain."

Berger winced, "Yeah, speaking of lunch... those restaurants downstairs looked awfully... fancy."

Sheila laughed, "Don't worry about it, Banana-Berger. If Jeanie did what I asked her to when I sent her away before you got here, we won't have to subject you to their snobby and boorish sensibilities." Sure enough, when she opened the door, there stood Jeanie and Cloud with four pizza boxes and a handful of change. At Claude and Berger's incredulous looks, Sheila merely lifted an eyebrow, "Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a decent pizza place in D.C.?"

\* \* \*

><p>Comments? Questions? Strawberries?<p>

Berger: \*happy face\* Mmm... Strawberries.

Cloud: \*tosses Berger an aerosol can\*

Berger: \*eyes can\* \*rae, confused\* Whipped cream?

Cloud: \*smirk\* Trust me, Uncle Berger. Would I steer you wrong?

Claude: \*steps up behind Cloud with arms crossed over chest\* Is there something going on here that I should know about?

Cloud: \*eeps\* Nope! Nothing at all, Uncle Claude! \*scampers away\* \*pause\* \*eg\* But I'm sure you will soon, anyway!

R-chan: \*slips Cloud a 50 on his way past\*

R-chan/Cloud: \*shared smirk\*

=^\_^=

And on a random other note? Just found out that instead of my mother going with me to see Hair on Wednesday, my sister may go instead. ^\_^ For some reason, that makes me happy. \*eg\* Maybe I can convince her to come up on stage with me at the end. Because I will be going up on stage at the end, this time, damn it! \*determined face\*

End  
file.